

Wildlife Fact Sheet # 5

Rufous Bettong *Aepyprymnus rufescens*



Description:

A member of the Rat-kangaroo family, the Rufous Bettong is a small, upright kangaroo with white fur on its chest and belly. The silver-red fur on its back is where it gets its name 'Rufous', which means red. They have long powerful hind feet and a long tail and can hop at high speeds in typical kangaroo fashion. Standing about 30cm tall, the Rufous Bettong weighs up to 3kg and can live to around 5 years of age.

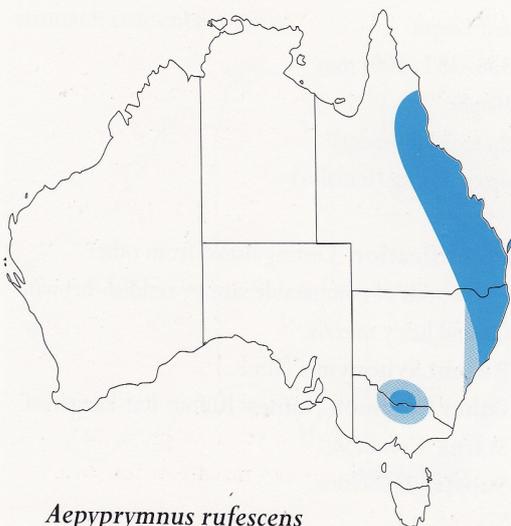
Conservation Status:

Rufous Bettongs once numbered in the millions and were found throughout the entire Murray Darling Basin and eastern Australia. They disappeared from Victoria and southern NSW in the early 1900s, with their distribution now significantly reduced to parts of Queensland and northeastern NSW. The main threats have been feral predation, particularly by red foxes, and extensive habitat loss through land clearance and livestock grazing.



Habitat, Diet & Breeding:

Bettongs prefer open Eucalyptus forests & woodlands that have a good grassy understorey, rather than a dense shrub layer, and they move out onto adjacent grasslands to feed at night. Although Bettongs are primarily solitary, their home ranges of about 20ha (up to 110 ha) often overlap with others, and home ranges may vary in size considerably depending on food availability. In areas of good quality habitat, population densities can equal 1 to 7 individuals per hectare. Bettongs feed on the roots and tubers of a variety of native and exotic plants, the stem bases and seeds of perennial grasses, and many kinds of fungi. They eat insect larvae and play an important role in controlling pest insects like woodborers. They have even been seen eating carrion and chewing bones.



Aepyprymnus rufescens

Australian Ecosystems Foundation Inc.

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Bettongs will drink during extended droughts, but most of their water comes from the metabolism of food. In the right conditions, Bettongs can breed all year round with a gestation of 22-24 days. Young attach to 1 of 4 teats and remain in the pouch for 4 months. They are at foot for another month before becoming independent. Sexual maturity is normally reached at 1 year, but some females can breed when they are only 5-6 months old, and are able to have up to 3 joeys per year.



Interesting Facts:

During the day, Bettongs sleep in spherical nests built of grass to protect them from wind, sun and rain and to avoid predators. They dig shallow depressions next to a grass tussock or fallen timber, line it with grass and weave a dome over the top. The grass stalks are collected with their mouth and forelimbs, rolled into a bundle and carried in a prehensile tail. Each individual will have up to 6 nests over a few hectares, all out of sight from the other. If a predator comes close, the Bettong will burst from its nest and head to another nest to conceal itself again. The Bettong will abandon any nest discovered by predators and build a new one the next night. Nest building behaviour tends to occur in the hours before sunrise. As the Rufous Bettong has a prehensile tail, they can't lean back on it to fight like the larger kangaroos typically do. A Bettong will hiss and cough at its opponent, even stamping a hind foot up and down, but they have to lie on their side to be able to kick.

The Bettongs, are "forest friends" for the numerous good roles they play in the natural environment. By turning over the leaf litter in their search for food and breaking this plant matter down, they aid the detritus cycle to release essential nutrients and form new soil. They help disperse beneficial soil biota, like fungi spores, through the forest. The health of grassy ecosystems is improved as Bettongs remove the dead grass thatch to make nests, creating the inter-tussock spaces required for other small herbs and wildflowers to grow.



The future:

The little kangaroos once ranged across many part of Australia and it is the intention of the Australian Ecosystems Foundation Inc. to maintain populations in feral-free environments. As populations grow, AEFI will work with other institutions and government departments to see the species brought back to the wild..

How you can help:

You can support the Rufous Bettong conservation programs of the Australian Ecosystems Foundation Inc through animal sponsorship, donations, or visiting our reserves. Visit our website for more details.